

Southern Writing in the Field of History and Biography

By Robert S. Henry

THE South is a product of its history. Its peculiar awareness of an inner unity in the almost infinite variations of topography and climate, resource and activity, to be found in the 2,000 miles between the line of Mason and Dixon and the Rio Grande; its state of being as a region apart, looked upon by others and looking upon itself as somehow different, could never have come to be and could not persist today without the sense of a history common to the South, and peculiar to it as well.

That common and peculiar history came to a focus in the War Between the States but it neither began nor ended there. It began, in so far as any history may be said to have a definite beginning, with the migration of peoples to the Southern shores, with their advance, by generations, from the lowlands of the coast through the pines to the Piedmont, over the mountains to the valleys beyond, across the great river and on to the wide southwest. Of that history, much is traditional, much scattered in manuscript and ancient file, or in the compilations of local commentators and historians. Much, however, has been gathered by the patient hand of research, and organized for use and enjoyment by the insight and skill of the generation who worked in Southern history when their endeavors were still looked upon, by the world at large, as little more than the nostalgic presentation of a world and a way that were gone.

But they wrote, truly and wisely, according to the formula of that ancient Rebel who demanded "strictly impartial history written from a Southern point of view." There was, and is, a need for just that point of view. One generation of this nation—that part of it outside the South—had been brought up on a writing of history which, for example, conceived the westward push of population to the north of the parallel 36 degrees 30 minutes north latitude as a mission to civilize a continent, but saw in the westward push of population below that parallel a diabolical design of the slaveocracy. Another generation had been reared under the waving folds of the bloody shirt. Another was reared in the smug conceit that the South's part had been played, its work done, and its ideas destroyed forever.

But ideas are not destroyed merely because they are defeated. Events have brought a new attention to those ideas once regarded as distinctively Southern—even though the South itself has largely discarded them in these recent years—but that alone does not account for the spreading acceptance of Southern history as of national interest and import.

Without the work of a whole generation of historians, most of them Southern, some Northern, but all writing "impartially from a Southern viewpoint" in the truest sense of that phrase, the foundation of fact and clear understanding upon which the new acceptance of Southern history rests could never have been laid.

Such an understanding could hardly have come sooner than it did. Ancient preconceptions and prejudices die hard. Lamar might utter his memorial on Sumner while Reconstruction yet lay on states of the South, but not until another generation had passed was the country at large ready to hear Adams' noble centennial oration, or to receive Bradford's portrait of Lee as the American. Mrs. Avary's rich and understanding picture of Reconstruction days, without the slightest tinge of bitterness, came too soon to have its truth accepted by an indifferent nation. But as the door was opened to a new thought as to the War Between the States, so was it to be opened as to the era of Reconstruction by the devoted work of Professor Dunning and his pupils, and their pupils in turn, until today the country at large recognizes the folly and the wrong of that attempt to destroy and remake.

Southern history, no longer restricted to the more formal political and military themes, is no longer sectional either in authorship or in acceptance. That is the big fact of late years in Southern historiography; the big new opportunity for workers and writers in that field. Today they write for a national audience, about facts and ideas which, under stress of events, are assuming an aspect of national import.

"He that loveth a book," says Isaac Barrow, "will never want a faithful friend, a wholesome counsellor, a cheerful companion, an effectual comforter. By study, by reading, by thinking, one may innocently divert and pleasantly entertain himself, as in all weathers, so in all fortunes."